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ABSTRACT

This longitudinal study of eight London families used rational choice theory to explore the extent to which parents behaved rationally while seeking a secondary school for their children, according to rights given them by England's Education Reform Act (1988). Families were recruited at two London primary schools serving predominantly low socioeconomic areas. Parents were interviewed five times and maintained diaries over the 18 month school choice process. Interview questions concerned criteria used when choosing schools, processes used to seek information, and strategies used to create a preference order. Findings suggested that parents did not act rationally when investigating and selecting schools. Rational choice theory predictions were more useful in explaining the tactics parents used in deciding what schools to list and the order in which to list them. Most parents tried to quantify uncertainty in the process by applying information they had gained earlier. The number of places available, number of potential applicants, and range of the school's catchment area determined level of risk involved in a choice or priority order. Parents tried to obtain accurate information but some did not trust the local authorities, could not obtain the needed information, or did not recall the needed information so could not realistically assess the amount of risk. The report concluded that rational choice theory was not satisfactory for an analysis of the choice because choice under uncertainty was not rational; attitudes, values, and personality also influenced behavior. Two appendices describe the families and the schools involved. (Contains 31 references.) (KDFB)

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Choosing a Secondary School: can parents' behaviour be described as rational?

Stuart Martin

Abstract.

This longitudinal study of eight families identifies two phases of the parental choice process and explores the extent to which parents behave rationally while seeking a secondary school place for their children. The phases are characterised as Becoming Informed and, subsequently, Expressing a Preference. During the first stage, the parents in this study did not appear to develop rational or comprehensive search strategies, but acquired information about schools in a random and haphazard manner. Few parents expressed confidence in official publications, such as the Parents' Charter or school brochures, but instead they relied on informal sources of information, such as 'gossip' and 'hearsay', in order to become informed about particular schools. They then employed the information that they had gained to reinforce already existing impressions, and overlooked contradictory evidence which challenged their preferences. It also appeared that the process by which parents expressed their preferences for particular schools could not easily be described as rational. Although most parents appeared to be seeking the most appropriate school for their child, some actively sought places at schools that did not meet the criteria that they themselves had set. The relationship between the criteria that parents claimed to be desirable and the actions of those same parents appeared to be extremely complex, and greater explanation of the reasons for the seemingly irrational behaviour of some of the parents while expressing their preferences is still required.

Context and method.

The Education Reform Act (1988) gave parents the right to express a preference of secondary school for their children and required schools to accept any applicants provided that the school was not oversubscribed and that the applicants conformed with the published admissions criteria. The Government publicised the new legislation in The Parents' Charter, which informed parents that they could choose the schools that they would like their children to attend. There appeared to be an implicit assumption that parents were rational actors in the marketplace and that they had both the desire and skills to act as knowledgeable consumers when choosing between different schools in the interests of their children.

Access to the respondents in this study was obtained through two primary schools that serve a reasonably well defined community at the lower end of the SES spectrum in an outer London borough. In the previous year, only 86% of parents in this borough had gained their first choice secondary school, a figure which has remained constant for some years (O'Leary 1993). All of the parents of Year 5 pupils in the two schools were sent a letter inviting them to participate in the research and all of the parents who responded were interviewed. Given the low participation rate, eight out of sixty families, the study does not claim to be generalisable and is in fact a case study, reporting on the experiences of this group of families. In order to obtain the data, parents were interviewed in their homes on five separate occasions over an eighteen month period, many of them were accompanied to open evenings, and documentation was inspected and discussed with them. The parents also maintained diaries during the process and were encouraged to reflect upon the case material as it accumulated. The families were sent application forms ('TRANS 1') by the local authority in September and then attended various school publicity and information events during the following term. By November they were required to have opted for up to three maintained schools in the borough and in February successful and unsuccessful applicants were informed. Unsuccessful applicants were then permitted to appeal against decisions that had been made. Questions which were addressed during the course of the project included those directed towards the criteria that parents employed when choosing schools, the processes by which they sought information and the ways in which they used what they had discovered to create a preference order and to express

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and realise their preferences. In particular, an attempt was made to discover the extent to which the parents' behaviour could be explained in the context of rational choice theory.

Previous studies.

There was very little formal research into parent choice in England and Wales prior to 1980 and findings which were reported were generally coincidental to the main purposes of the studies. For example, the Plowden report (Central Advisory Council for Education, England 1967) surveyed over 3000 parents and discovered that only 6% of parents had attempted to exercise choice or had refused the place that was offered to them by their local authority. The general feeling of parents at this time was expressed by the National Confederation of Parent Teacher Associations, which commented that "parents essentially want to be able to send their children to the local school" (Simon 1988: 63). Some support for this view can be found in a study of working class families in West London which found that infant and primary schools were chosen, almost passively, on the grounds of accessibility (Johnson and Ransom 1983).

Since the Education Act of 1980 interest in the process of parent choice has greatly increased, and this is reflected in the quantity of published research and media speculation that is now available (e.g. Johnson and Ransom 1980, Elliott 1981, Alston 1985, Stillman and Maychell 1986, Adler, Petch and Tweedie 1989, West and Varlaam 1991, Hunter 1991, Webster et al 1993, West et al 1993). Although the early findings suggested that family links and proximity were identified as the most significant by parents, studies in the 1980s reported that parents considered a huge number of criteria as important to them. For example, over 1000 reasons for a particular choice were given in one study (University of Glasgow 1986), while in another, "2245 parents gave 7689 classifiable reasons between them" (Stillman and Maychell 1986: 86), even though almost 20% gave no reasons at all. Because of the huge numbers of criteria identified as important by parents, any categorisation or analysis will be open to criticism because the number of possible combinations that parents might seek are outside the reasonable limits of quantification. However, although the total number of reasons given by parents for school choice is large, most parents appear to consider that their child's happiness and preference are highly influential factors. Additionally, good discipline and convenience seem to be highly rated.

Although parents take into account a complex array of factors when making decisions about preferable schools, the factors that are reported by parents are vague and imprecise and each of them might well mean something different for each individual. For example, 'school reputation' is very difficult to quantify, as are 'good teachers' or 'good discipline'. It has been hypothesised that parents who choose good discipline as an important school characteristic do so because they believed that children could learn only in an orderly environment (Hunter 1991: 39) and because good exam results were seen to be an important outcome of schooling. If this is the case, then good discipline as a factor is not easily separated from other, school based criteria, such as good exam results. Consequently, an emphasis on naming factors is only partially useful in gaining an understanding of the school choice process. For this reason, some studies have explored the process itself in order to gain some understanding of the sources of information that parents find useful and the uses to which they put the information.

Information is at the heart of any market oriented system and gaining and utilising knowledge about schools is one of the most important tasks for parents if they are to make an informed and rational choice. Although, "the 1980 Education Act gave parents the right, within limits, to choose their children's schools in the light of statements about policies, the curriculum and examination results which each school was legally obliged to publish" (Brooks 1991: 31), it was found in 1982 that the most important influences on parents during the choice process were teachers, while brochures were important to only a tiny minority of parents (Elliot 1981). As late as 1986, it was reported that few LEAs made sufficient clear information available to parents, with

information that was available being either localised or generalised to such an extent that it was impossible to distinguish between schools within a local authority (Stillman and Maychell 1986: 19). However, in two recent studies (West et al 1993, Webster et al 1993) parents were asked about the sources of their information and their understanding and interpretation of it, and the findings of these studies provide valuable insights into the parental choice process.

West et al (1993) found that the most important sources of information reported by parents were school visits, booklets, friends/neighbours, other parents, another child in the family, local knowledge, and the primary head, but what was not determined was the influence that each of these sources had on the parents' final choices. Most parents claimed that it was important to take children's views into account (see also Webster et al 1993: 40), or that they talked 'a lot' with their children about the decision and that agreement was usually achieved (West et al 1993). The sources of a child's experiences and perceptions has not been explored, although it seems likely that most information is gained from informal contact with current pupils at a secondary school or their siblings.

West et al (1993) reported that almost all of the parents in the study had visited schools, but more than half had visited two or fewer. Additionally, almost a third of the parents claimed not to have read any brochures produced by schools or the LEA. It seems reasonable to assume that these parents had already made some decisions about acceptable schools before the school visits began. They were obviously not investigating all the potential schools, but had limited themselves to a small number that they were studying in more detail. Half of the parents claimed to find exam results useful, but many had found the documents hard to understand. In fact, only about half of the parents interviewed by West and her colleagues considered that they understood the transfer process or the admissions criteria.

Webster et al (1993) found that parents had conflicting opinions about school prospectuses and brochures, with an equal number finding them useful or expressing negative comments. Only a small minority of parents claimed that they were most influenced by 'public' information, such as open evenings or brochures, (Webster et al 1993: 17), and, although it was found that almost all of the parents had heard of league tables, few had attached much importance to them. Some parents used them to confirm already existing impressions, but a significant minority expressed very negative opinions in relation to the tables, which they saw as misleading or inadequate (Webster et al 1993: 45). No parents felt that the LEA information was useful and few paid any attention to newspapers or TV. "This idea of consciously restricting the available information input is one which has found its place in very recent models of consumer behaviour" (Webster et al 1993: 33) and it was hypothesised that parents were more trusting of what they found out personally, as against attempts by the school to 'hard sell' itself (Webster et al 1993: 21). Consequently, direct contact between parents and individual pupils at the school, in particular student guides at open evenings, were considered by many parents to be especially influential. (Webster et al 1993: 23). Direct contact included contact between parents and teachers, with some of the parents being influenced by the way that teachers communicated with parents (Webster et al 1993: 25). Teacher dress and presentation, and the relationship between teachers and pupils were also cited as influential. The parents also identified other external influences, especially those that they trusted, as being important sources of information. Social networks, such as friends, other parents with children at the school and colleagues at work were mentioned, as were pupils at the school and even neighbours (Webster et al 1993: 32). Many of these sources were informal and largely out of the control of the school or LEA, but even night classes played their part in helping parents to become more familiar with a school. In fact,

> "though most external target audience are not potential buyers of education services, they none the less carry around with them a perception of local schools and therefore may exercise considerable sway over parents' and childrens' ultimate choice of institution ... in

> circumstances where parents lack knowledge of local schools, such informal communication might be critical or decisive to their decision" (Barnes 1993: 7).

In addition to describing impressions that were developed over a long period of time, some parents mentioned 'critical moments' (Webster et al 1993: 32) as significant influences on their choice of school.

It seems that parents' perception of a particular school is often the result of stereotypical images that they hold and that a "school will tend to be categorised as fitting into a particular category which may bear very little relationship to the reality of that or any other school" (Pardey 1991: 39). It is probable that "... parents ... are not rational information devourers who weigh all the available evidence to reach logical conclusions ..." (Webster et al 1993: 73). Instead,

> "research in the business domain has demonstrated the complexities and subtleties of consumer choice in all areas of the market place. So there are good reasons for assuming that parent responses in relation to school choice will not be accounted for adequately by simplistic models based on information flow" (Webster et al 1993: 7).

In addition, it has been found that there are considerable differences between the behaviour and expectations of different groups or parents, and that ethnic background is sometimes an important variable in this respect (Hunter 1991). However, other studies have reported that they found little difference between ethnic groups, but that significant differences in response were found between different social classes (West et al 1993: 40). There are suggestions that parents with better jobs and education draw on a wider range of sources, value academic factors rather than brochures, and are less likely to choose the local school (Stillman and Maychell 1986). A three year study of the Alum Rock public demonstration project on open enrolment found that "significant differences existed in family awareness of school and programme choices. Initially, economically advantaged families had more and better information from which to make choices than did economically disadvantaged families" (Young and Clinchy 1992: 27). Uchitelle (1978) also found that "minority and low income parents in a mid-western school district were not as knowledgeable about the opportunities for choice as were their middle and upper income counterparts".

Discussion of the findings.

Rational Choice Theory was originally developed by economists and philosophers and is a very large field with a vast literature. Although discussion of collective choice can be extremely technical, "meaning, significance and relevance can be discussed informally" (Sen 1970: vii), and this will be the case in this instance. Traditionally, rational choice is represented as the selection of an optimal solution to a problem. A rational choice is held to be one in which the following elements are present.

1. There is a feasible set of actions which can lead to the desired end.
2. The consequences of each action can be assessed as possessing outcomes which are characterised by certainty, quantifiable risk, or uncertainty.
2. The feasible set of actions are ranked according to the probability that they will result in the desired outcome.
3. The participant chooses the alternative which has the best chance of satisfying their desires. (from March and Simon 1958, Elster 1986, Slote 1989).

In other words, "to act rationally simply means to choose the highest ranking element in the feasible set" (Elster 1986: 4), but this apparent simplicity is misleading. There are some difficulties with the model that has been presented. First, the model assumes that the feasible set

of actions can be identified, but does not consider how a participant might do this. Second, it is extremely unlikely that any participant could have access to the entire range of feasible actions. Instead, it is probable that each participant will deliberately limit the alternatives in order to make the potential set of actions more manageable. Each participant is likely to create their own 'definition of the situation' (March and Simon 1958: 139). Third, it is only when the outcomes are certain that a choice could be called fully rational, although outcomes which are characterised by risk that is quantifiable may qualify. However, when the potential outcomes are characterised by uncertainty, selection of alternatives is unlikely to be able to be described as rational.

When considering situations of choice, it is important to make a distinction between decisions which are parametric in nature and those which are strategic (Elster 1986: 5). Parametric decisions are those where the situation contains external factors which are identifiable and immutable, and which the individual can take into account when making the decision. Strategic decisions (Elster 1986: 5), which are probably of more relevance to this discussion, are those in which the outcomes are reliant on the decisions of others. The participant making the decision must not only decide what is best for him or her, but must take into account the decisions of others and how they might affect their own potential outcome. When individuals or families are choosing schools they are entering a game which contains many other participants, all of whom are carrying out similar calculations of means to an end. Each participant family may have its own preference ranking but the chances of success are dependent on the preference rankings of the other participants. In other words, "the choice of each depends on the choice of all" (Elster 1986: 7).

Although rationality is assumed to be an important characteristic of human behaviour, it cannot be used to describe all activities. People may be "deflected from their goals by Freudian-type emotional factors" (Harsanyi 1977: 84) or they may "fail to pursue any well-defined objectives altogether" (ibid). Examples of factors which may frustrate rational behaviour include indifference, incomplete preference ranking, choices under uncertainty, and the inability to know when enough information has been collected.

Processing Information.

In order for people to make rational choices, they must be satisfied that their belief is related to the evidence that they have collected concerning the issue. It can sometimes be difficult for them to know that the evidence which has been collected is both sufficient and appropriate. An important question that they all faced involved the amount of evidence that should be collected because, "every decision to act can be seen as accompanied by a *shadow decision* - the decision about when to stop collecting information" (Elster 1986: 14). Not surprisingly, the parents all found it difficult to know when enough information had been collected and, consequently, when to stop. Although the parents did all collect large amounts of information, the value of the knowledge that they gained was questioned by many. In order to illustrate the difficulties faced by parents, what follows is a discussion of the way in which one family decided on their preferred school. Parents' knowledge of strategies that would enable them to be successful in gaining a particular school place will be examined later. This section will focus on the criteria that the parents regarded as important when selecting a desired school for their child, and describe the search strategies that they developed in order to discover to what extent the schools met their expectations.

The process of selecting and successfully gaining a place at a secondary school has two distinct, but related, 'programs' (March and Simon 1958: 137). During the first part of the process, the parents' strategies appear to be directed towards collecting the information that will enable them to order rationally the alternatives that might be available to them. During the second part of the process, parents employ the information that they have collected in an attempt

to reduce the uncertainty that is entailed in the completion of the TRANS 1 and other application forms. Although it was noted that parents' awareness developed as the process continued, their preferences remained remarkably unaltered. The first interviews with the parents took place in June, some two and a half months before the start of the formal phase of information collecting. At this time, the parents had already been collecting information, generally from 'gossip' and 'hearsay' for some time. They had developed impressions of the schools over a number of years, and these impressions were often strikingly similar, despite the fact that parents lived considerable distances apart and had very different expectations of schools. For example, most parents shared a view that Ashburton was not a 'good' school, unlike Shirley.

> Mrs Hyde (about Ashburton): "it's got bad reputation ... there's a lack of discipline ... there's a large group that are out of control ... (Shirley) ... it's in a very nice place ... it's better than Ashburton ...".
>
> Mrs Forrest (about Ashburton): "... had a bad reputation ... (the Local Authority) have spent a lot of money on it and have made an effort to turn it around, but it was pretty awful ... (Shirley) ... Sally wants to go there because she feels that she would be safe ...".
>
> Mrs Old (about Ashburton): " ... I wouldn't want him to go there ... from what is said ...".

At this stage, parents had also developed a range of criteria that they believed were necessary for a school to be considered as acceptable for their child. The reasons that parents selected particular criteria were sometimes quite easy to find. For example, Mr and Mrs Green articulated a shared image of Matthew:

> Mrs Green: "Matthew's not an academic child, he prefers to work with his hands ... he doesn't like football ... he's not an athletic type, so he prefers to do things with his hands ... design things ..."
> Mr Green: "Matthew has perhaps a slight reading difficulty ..."
> Mrs Green: "... to me he seems like quite a lonely child ..."
> Mr Green: "I don't expect that we've got a budding Prime Minister or scientist there ... he's got lots of practical ability, commonsense ..."
> Mrs Green: "... he's on the quieter side ... the school will need to bring out his self confidence ... he gets bullied, so there must be a positive strategy to counter that ...".

Matthew had been bullied in the past, but the Greens were very happy with the way that the primary school had dealt with the incidents, although the issue of bullying was one that they returned to a number of times. The bullies themselves had been identified by both Matthew and his parents as 'coloured' and, although ethnic mix was not directly cited by the Greens as a factor in their search for a secondary school, they made a number of comments indicating that they were seeking a school where the majority of the pupils were white.

It is probably impossible to determine whether the Greens and the other parents decided on their lists of criteria before or after they settled on their range of acceptable schools. In fact, it is more likely that the two processes occurred concurrently, with each informing the other. However, it is possible to hypothesise that both the criteria and the schools are chosen largely to conform with the parents' impressions of their child, although the Green's subsequent actions cast doubt on the validity of this hypothesis. In Matthew's case, the factors that Mr and Mrs Green identified as important can all be seen to be related to their view of Matthew and the incidents that they had experienced at primary school. Their desire for a first year centre and committed and friendly teachers, the importance of Matthew's happiness, and the requirement that the school suit Matthew's special needs all clearly stem from their interpretation of Matthew's needs.

Mr. Green: It depends on his needs ... you don't send him somewhere where he's going to struggle ... in our particular child's instances we may be rather restricted ... our particular needs and the emphasis on special learning we'd have to see what facilities they can offer Matthew, so we're looking for a tailored package ...".

Mrs Forrest confirmed that she believed that this was behind the thinking of most parents at this stage, saying that,

"... you see what you're looking for ... it's important to match the child to the school ... horses for courses ...".

When the Greens moved into the next phase, that of formal information gathering, their strategy was difficult to identify. Some of their criteria were relatively easy to quantify, so these should have been easily assessed by school visits or study of documents. However, Mr and Mrs Green found the concepts and words of much the transfer documentation difficult to understand. The first year centre, the up to date equipment, the wall displays, and access to home were factors that were actively assessed in each school that they visited, but the less quantifiable factors, such as committed teachers, good special needs and a strong Head were more difficult for them to identify and evaluate. Consequently, although they visited all of the schools that interested them, and asked questions, listened, and observed, they made their decisions on impressionistic grounds, rather than through a process of rational choice. For example, they became strongly committed to an application to Edenham GM school quite early on. This was despite the advice from the primary school head that it would be inappropriate.

Mrs. Green: "... the head (of the primary school) says that it runs much more on grammar school lines and he doesn't think it's suitable for Matthew ...".

The Greens had decided that Edenham was their first choice on the basis of a fleeting visit,

Mrs. Green: "First impression was that it was alright ..."
Matthew: "Yeah ..."
Mrs. Green: "We looked at the outside, we didn't go inside, we drove into the carpark ... I said to Matthew, "what do you think of this one?" ... he said "I like this one out of them all" ...",

but they thought that it might be difficult to gain a place,

Mrs Green: "It could be difficult because it's a grammar type school".

They visited the school on the open evening and attempted to find out whether the school would meet their criteria. They found that the "Year 7 pupils have their own separate playground" and that,

Mrs Green: "Special Needs was disappointing - only really present in English ... only a few schools gave enough emphasis on Special Needs and this wasn't one".

They also found that "the school was very much into sport ... lots of trophies ... this is not up Matthew's street". Matthew thought that "the Head seemed really old" (he has since retired), but he "liked the technology and science". Although both parents agreed that there was a "big emphasis on pastoral things", Mrs Green though that "he wouldn't cope". Mr Green was slightly more positive saying that "they don't suffer bullying. Still, he might be out of his depth". They had also measured the distance to the school and decided that it was 2.3 miles from their home and

difficult to get to. The journey would require that Matthew take two buses, or that Mrs Green learn to drive so that she could take him to school. Given that so many of their criteria were either unmet or contradicted, it seemed unlikely that they would actively pursue a place for Matthew at Edenham. In addition, when asked about their chances of being offered a place, it was obvious that they were unable to quantify the risk.

> Mr. Green: "... the bottom line is, we've got no idea basically. They've got parameters here (*referring to the Secondary School Brochure*) they set down if you do it by such and such a yardstick etc., but it still doesn't guarantee that you're going to get a place ... obviously, by saying that by certain deadlines you must have done such and such a thing, and also there's a certain preference if you've got a child going to the school, and these LEA (*pronounced 'lee'*) transfer forms, I don't know what the hell they're referring to, but ... OK, it has spelt out ... but there are so many different criteria you confuse yourself - where would you come in on this, that's my feeling ... it's a little bit confusing ... rather than going into all these lawyer's jargon and all these paragraphs and sub-paragraphs, what you want is ... single lines to some extent that clearly say "these are the parameters where your child would stand a reasonable chance of being accepted" but here you've got to read ..."

The Greens decided to apply for a place at Edenham despite it not meeting their stated criteria. They received a letter in February stating that they would not be offered a place at the school, but offering them a place on the waiting list. They were then offered a place at Ashburton, which they refused in writing. Mr Green recognised that this was a act which carried a great deal of risk, but stated that they would not allow Matthew to attend Ashburton. He was, however, unable to predict what would happen if no other places were offered. Fortunately, one week later, they received another letter from Edenham offering them a place, but containing no explanation of the changed decision.

It is not easy to explain the Green's behaviour in terms of rational choice theory. They did not develop a consistent search strategy, but relied on 'impressions'. Although they claimed to have criteria that a school would have to meet, they had little experience or ability to recognise or measure these criteria. When the criteria were quantifiable, they ignored the evidence that they collected and explained it away. They obviously weighted some criteria more heavily than others, although this was not clear to them at the time, and their final decision appeared to be based on a qualitative impression that they were unable to describe. Mr Green tried to explain by saying that,

> Mr Green: "I don't know why we liked one rather than another ... I can't put my finger on it ... it's like buying a property".

Competing with others.

In the light of this example, it seems probable to conclude that parents did not act in a rational way when investigating and selecting desirable schools. However, rational choice theory might have something to offer when explaining the tactics that parents employed in order to have their preferences met, although it is unlikely that the parents found the task to be straightforward, given the strategic nature of the preference expressing context. Whatever method a family employed when creating an agreed preference order, they then faced the task of expressing these preferences in such a way that they would be successful in gaining their preferred outcome. When trying to decide what schools to list and the order in which to list them, most parents appeared to become preoccupied by tactics. It is in this phase that the strategies that are encompassed by the concept of 'games theory' (Elster 1986) appeared to significantly influence many parents' thoughts, but not necessarily their actions. It is also at this stage that some

parents' search for the optimal school gave way to active consideration of the tactics that would need to be employed if their children were to gain a place at any satisfactory school. Although some parents continued optimising, some also began to consider satisficing (March and Simon 1958: 140), as they became aware of the tactical choices that they would have to make if they were to avoid Ashburton or other undesired schools.

Four families appeared to have had the possibility of acting rationally under conditions of near certainty. The Forrests knew that they would be offered a place at Shirley as the result of the sibling criterion, and the Chaudhrys were equally certain that Bhumika would be successful in gaining an offer from Ashburton on the grounds of proximity. Both the Olds and Mrs Rose had been advised that they would be guaranteed places if they expressed a first preference for Stanley Technical School on the TRANS 1. Because they had done this, they knew that an offer would be forthcoming. Consequently, only four of the families were operating entirely under conditions of uncertainty. Although the parents recognised that the process was accompanied by uncertainty, most of them attempted to quantify this uncertainty by applying the information that they had gained earlier in the process. There were two pieces of information that appeared to be particularly important in determining the level of risk that was involved in a particular choice or priority order. These were the relationship between the number of places available and the number of potential applicants for these places, and the extent of the geographical catchment area for each school. Although this historical information was available, it was not always easily accessible. The Local Authority in particular appeared to parents to be reluctant to provide them with the information on request despite statements that were made in the Secondary Schools Brochure (London Borough of Croydon 1993). The brochure was potentially useful to parents in relation to school capacities, in that it stated how many forms of entry each school could accommodate and that, "One form of entry in all Croydon Maintained Secondary schools ... is set at 30 pupils" (London Borough of Croydon 1993). It did not, however, indicate to what extent each school was under or oversubscribed, or give any advice about where this information could be obtained.

When considering the proportion of applicants to places, some parents believed that they knew the statistics, although their knowledge often proved to be limited. For example, Mrs. Old had been told by the Head of Stanley that there were 135 places available, but she had not been told how many applicants there had been last year. Some parents appeared to have spent a considerable amount of time and effort attempting to gain accurate information about numbers, but were not always satisfied with the attitude of the local authority and its employees.

> Interviewer: "You mentioned that the number of applications could be important."
> Mr. Hyde: "Yes ... they tell you what the intake is ..."
> Mrs. Hyde: "They tell you that they have six form entry ..."
> Interviewer: "But they don't tell you how many pupils apply?"
> Mr. Hyde: "No."
> Mrs. Hyde: "They won't tell you that ... I've asked that ... because you want to give yourself the best possible chance ..."
> Interviewer: "So you've specifically asked it?"
> Mrs. Hyde: "Yes, they won't tell you ...".

Mrs Old mentioned that she had been told at Harris that there were 1000 applicants for 160 places, that they came from a wide geographical area, and that 90 places were reserved for children who were residents of the borough. Shirley and Westwood also both made similar data on number of places and applicants available at the Open Evenings. Parents did have access to some of the figures, but for many they were not easily obtained or, alternatively, remembered. Without these particular figures parents could make no realistic assessment of the amount of risk that they were taking when prioritising their choices.

The second piece of information which would be essential if parents were to reduce the uncertainty of the consequences of their decisions was detailed knowledge about the historical catchment area for each school. Most parents admitted to knowing that a significant criterion for acceptance by each school was 'distance from the school', and they were generally aware that they needed to be able to compare their residential location with a historical pattern of successful applicants. Information about catchment areas was not, however, always easy to obtain or, when discovered, necessarily accurate.

Many parents also found that Education Officers were not willing to show them historical zones. For example, Mrs Forrest declared that "... they (the LEA) won't give you the catchment areas ..." and Mrs Hyde, whose distrust of the LEA grew as the process progressed, had found the authority to be quite unhelpful.

> Mrs Hyde: "Croydon are very bad ... they're reluctant to tell you anything ... they were very unhelpful ..."
> Interviewer: "Have you traced the boundaries of the catchment area over the past few years?"
> Mrs. Hyde: "No, they wouldn't tell ... I've tried to but they wouldn't tell me where they were ... the people at the Education office ... they say they don't draw them because they vary so much and it varies throughout the school year ... although I believe that the schools have a good idea from what they tell you ... but they don't tell you."

However, during the Open Evenings, most schools did display a map of the catchment areas of the past three years, but these were not seen by all of the parents and, in any case, were not necessarily accurate. Mrs Forrest, who already had two children at Shirley, commented that the map that was in the foyer during the Open Evening was "wrong - I know a girl from (*indicating a street inside the apparent area*) who didn't get in". In addition, this particular map showed that this year's projected area was even bigger. Mrs Forrest admitted that she would not trust the map and would not be able to rely on it for accurate information. Mrs Forrest was a "key informant" (Wolcott 1988: 195) in this case, because of her familiarity with Shirley High School and her experience with the school choice process in both Croydon and as a past employee of ILEA.

Although all of the parents attended Open Evenings and listened to speeches by the Headteachers, the content of the Heads' addresses seemed to be almost irrelevant to most parents: it was the symbolic nature of the event that served to either confirm or disconfirm existing impressions. The lack of attention to the content was most graphically illustrated in Mrs Grey's response to the Head's speech at Coloma. In this speech the Head stated that,

> "although technically we accept girls who are not Catholics, we are heavily oversubscribed. This means that we have not actually accepted any non-Catholics for some years".

Despite hearing this, Mrs Grey decided to put Coloma down as her first choice, because both she and her mother had attended that school, and because it still had a good reputation, although she admitted that Helen would find it difficult to gain a place at Coloma because,

> Mrs Grey: "... I was a Catholic and Helen's not - which is a big thing against her".

However, she thought that an offer from Shirley would be much more likely saying, "I would think it's pretty good". Although Mrs Grey had quantified the risk and was probably quite accurate in her analysis, when she completed that TRANS 1 form she selected Coloma as her first choice and Shirley as her second, thus ensuring that she would not be offered a place at Shirley.

Because she herself had admitted that it was unlikely that Coloma would seriously consider offering Helen a place because she did not fulfil one of the most important criteria, it is difficult to interpret her behaviour as rational.

All parents reported that each of the secondary schools, except Ashburton, had urged them to request that school as their first preference or face the probability of not being allocated a place. Most parents were aware of the importance of the first choice, even though their reasoning was often not particularly accurate.

> Mrs. Green: "... I've been hearing from other parents that, once you put a first choice down, and then a second choice ... you get turned down for your first choice, it's very hard to be accepted by the second choice ... but it's only hearsay ... but that's what worries you because you want to find the right school to put it down as first choice ..."
> Mr. Green: "... so it's putting you under the pressure of who you put as your first choice."
> Mrs. Green: "I've been hearing from parents that when you put your first choice down, when you get turned down from that, then your second choice might say "no, we wasn't your first choice" ..."
> Mr. Green: "... "so we're not going to have you because obviously you didn't want us really" ... if you miss out on your first choice, it's harder to get your second because the school says that you're obviously not keen ... we're not sure what to do for the best."

Mrs Faye listened carefully to the relevant information at Shirley and commented that the Head had told her quite clearly that she should not "put Shirley second ... it must be first or you won't get in". Mrs. Old agreed that, "only your first choices count. If it's not your first choice, don't bother", and Mr Grey commented that, if they missed out on their first choice, "well then it's turned into a lottery".

Mrs Forrest knew that almost all of the schools were oversubscribed with first preferences and she understood the consequences if this was the case. She commented that,

> "I spend a lot of my time trying to persuade intelligent friends not to make stupid choices ... if you miss your first choice, you might not get any choice at all ... my friend chose two schools that were so far out of her geographical area that she would only have got in if nobody else had applied".

It has been suggested that some social action can be explained by unanimity (Sen 1970: 24), in which case individuals would attain consensus because the costs of doing otherwise would be too high. It is unlikely that this is a viable explanation for the current operation of open enrolment, given that some schools are heavily oversubscribed and others are not at all popular. It seems to be more likely in this case that the strategies that are chosen by families when expressing their preference are likely to be a consequence of a non-cooperative game which has constant sum or zero sum outcome, given that there are only a limited number of places in the most popular schools. Although the families appeared to adopt game considerations when expressing their preferences, it seemed that they tended to select optimally rather than behave consistently with the risk that they had ascertained. Optimisation "requires an agent to always do what is likely to be best or most preference-satisfying for herself" (Slote 1989: 4) but, even when attempting to optimise, parents found it difficult because of the incomplete information that was available to them. Some were explicit about this but others were not, at least partly because they were unaware of the incompleteness of their information. At best, they were operating under conditions of 'bounded rationality' (March and Simon 1958, March 1978) due to their lack of information and their inability to interpret it effectively.

However, it was not just lack of information that caused parents to reject apparently optimal schools. For example, Mr and Mrs Hyde rejected various rational possibilities because of the effect that these would have on the other aspects of their lives. Although they discussed the possibility of using a convenience address, moving house, and selecting private schooling, they did not take advantage of any of these seemingly rational actions in order to gain an optimal school place for Felicity. They appeared to compromise on the issue of a school place for Felicity, but it is likely that their decision to accept an offer from Harris was, in fact, a rational decision, given that it was but one element in their life as a family. If school choice alone is considered, it is possible that the Hydes were not optimising, but were satisficing in respect of their preference. Satisficing could be said to occur when "a rational individual might seek less than the best for himself" (Slote 1989: 8). The Hydes appeared to be accepting less than the optimal choice if school choice alone was considered, but of course it was not - it was only one of a great number of choices that required to be considered. When all related factors were taken into account, it is possible that Harris was, in fact, the best alternative available for Felicity in the context of her family.

It seems probable that the greatest benefits of a detailed understanding of rational choice theory will not be derived by parents who are choosing schools for their children, but by planners who are selecting between alternative policies for large social organisations. They have access to the mathematics and to a greater amount of information on which to base their decisions, whereas individuals and families do not generally have access to sufficient information or to the high level skills that are required to apply the theories. Rational choice theory is useful in analysing and explaining family choice but, in order to accurately predict the outcome of a particular situation, "we may have to go into an enormously complicated criterion" (Sen 1970: 199). However, although rational choice theory cannot generally specify a particular course of action that will result in the attainment of a preference expressions, individuals and families could benefit from the general descriptive nature of the theory. Although the descriptive conception of the theory has been described as containing "poverty of content" (Elster 1986: 2), it seems probable that, for most parents and children, it is the non-technical, common-sense elements of the theory that are the most useful and it is this aspect of the theory that will have the most influence on their decision making.

However, it seems probable that even the minimal demands of descriptive rational choice theory was not met by the behaviour of the families that has been recounted in this paper, at least partly because, "there remains a fundamental question of the relationship between preference and behaviour arising from a problem of interdependence of different people's choices which discredits rational calculus" (Sen 1970: 79). Choice under uncertainty can not be considered to be a rational action, no matter how hard the participants try to act rationally and at least four of the families in this study were operating under conditions of uncertainty. Consequently, it appears that rational choice theory is not a sufficient theory for explaining the behaviour of parents and children when it comes to choosing and expressing a preference for a secondary school place. As has been shown, most parents in this study did not pursue a rational search strategy and consequently found that information, although widely available, was disjointed and difficult to interpret. Once information was collected, families were required to select an agreed preference order and then to express this preference in the application process. Although most of the parents appeared to set out to behave rationally, their eventual success is likely to have been as much due to luck as to any consequences of rational action. As has been shown, although the behaviour of some families could be described, at least partially, as rational, others acted in ways that could only be described as irrational or representative of an alternative rationality that could not be identified by the researcher. Consequently, it is other forms of human behaviour that must be considered in addition to rationality when school choice is considered because,

"Information may be necessary for rational decision-making but behaviour is as much a response to attitudes, values and personality as it is to the outcomes of logical deduction. Attitudes (and the value systems of which they are a part) are affected by information and persuasion and by personality. They in turn determine behaviour. Attitudes determine how information is perceived and assimilated; it is easier to ignore or reject information which is inconsistent with attitudes that it is to change those attitudes" (Pardey 1991: 176).

Conclusion.

The outcomes of most preference statements cannot be guaranteed, although it could be argued that the introduction of the National Curriculum and its associated testing and reporting arrangements are an attempt to minimise the amount of risk that attending any particular school might entail. Despite this caveat, and for people to whom the content curriculum is only one factor in the desired school characteristics, most school choice contains a certain amount of risk or uncertainty. In most cases, the rational decision is to make the best possible choice in the situation: to optimise the potential outcome rather than than the specific preference. Writing in the name of the most popular school in the borough in every space on the preference form would probably not be considered a rational act. If, as is likely, the preference is not met, the chances of gaining a second best outcome are minimal: the other popular schools would be full and the only alternatives would be those schools which, for a variety of reasons, are undersubscribed. These schools may be a long way from home or may be of a different character to that which was originally desired. In this case, the choice would be highly risky and have a high chance of failure.

The Conservative governments of the past decade have promoted Open Enrolment because they appeared to believe that 'parental choice' would both raise standards and create efficiency savings in schools. As a consequence of their promotion of a market based system it appears to have been assumed that parents would behave as though they were rational consumers of schooling. However, the existing literature related to parental choice indicates that parents have neither the skills or the information about schools to act in such a rational way. The results of this study reinforce the view that parents make their choices of school and express their preferences after employing a range of techniques, most of which could not be described as rational. It is clear that, although many of the families in this sample attempted to adopt a search strategy which would be most appropriate to their needs, and to employ the information in a manner congruent with a rational choice model, they were not always sufficiently well informed to do this. Additionally, some of their actions could hardly be regarded as rational at all, especially in relation to preference expression. There is not yet sufficient evidence that would confirm the government's apparent implicit belief that parents act rationally when choosing schools for their children.

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ppendix One: The families.

Ir and Mrs Chaudhry and Bhumika. Mr and Mrs Chaudhry were born in East Africa and, after eceiving secondary education in India, emigrated to London in the 1970s. They have one other hild who is younger than Bhumika, and share their house with Mrs Chaudhry's brother and his amily. Bhumika's cousin is two years older than her and already attends Ashburton High School /hich is less than half a mile away. She is very happy at the school and her parents consider hat she is getting a good education. Mr and Mrs Chaudhry have high expectations for Bhumika and would like to see her join one of the professions, such as medicine or law.

Mrs Grey and Helen. Mrs Grey separated from her husband some years ago, although he lives nearby and they have an amicable relationship. He is closely involved in decisions that affect Helen's schooling and was present at the first interview. Helen is an only child and is interested n drama and dance. Mrs Grey attended a local Catholic girls' school, as did her mother, but she s no longer a practising Catholic. Although she works part time, Mrs Grey has a low income, and ives in a rented basement flat.

Mr and Mrs Forrest and Sally. The Forrests are a middle class family with three children. Charles, the oldest, has Downs Syndrome and has quite severe learning difficulties. He was accepted by Shirley High School five years ago and has been happy and successful at school. He has begun studies at a local FE College which specialises in teaching children with SEN. There is another daughter in Year 9 at Shirley. Consequently, the family did not anticipate that there would be any problem in Sally being offered a place at Shirley, due to the sibling criterion. Mr Forrest is an IT lecturer at the FE College which is attended by Charles, and Mrs Forrest works for the NHS as a medical secretary. She has previously worked for ILEA as an Appeals Officer, and was a Parent Governor at Railside Primary School for four years.

Mr and Mrs Hyde and Felicity. The Hydes expressed a belief that the 'right' secondary school is an important determinant of peoples' life chances. They believe strongly in government policies related to parent choice. Mrs Hyde exhibits a high level of anxiety and claims to have been worrying about the appropriate secondary school for Felicity since she started primary school, some six years ago. Felicity is the elder of two children and is considered by her parents to be extremely able academically. Mr Hyde is the Technical Services Manager for a transport company, and Mrs Hyde is a nurse with the School Health Service.

Mr and Mrs Green and Matthew. Mr and Mrs Green are a working class couple who both left school without qualifications. Mrs Green has an older daughter from a previous marriage, but Matthew is the only child of the current relationship. Matthew is a quiet boy who has been bullied at school. He has considerable learning difficulties in the areas of reading and writing, but is good with computers and enjoys making models. Mrs Green is not in paid employment, and Mr Green is a Technical Services manager with British Telecom.

Mrs Rose and Marcus. Mrs Rose is an African/Caribbean woman with three children. She lives alone and has no contact with her ex-husband who has returned to Jamaica. Mrs Rose is a mature student at a local HE College and has recently completed a BSc in Sports Science. She also works part time at the local Youth and Family Centre and teaches an aerobics nightclass at Ashburton High School. Her oldest daughter won a full scholarship to one of the local independent schools and her second daughter is in Year 7 at Harris CTC. Marcus is an energetic boy with a tendency to be in trouble at school. Consequently, his learning has been disrupted. He also has difficulties with literacy and numeracy and Mrs Rose has been in dispute with his primary school about their SEN policies for some years. Consequently, she has been elected as a Parent Governor at the school and has taken a special interest in the education of children with SEN. Marcus has received private tuition in reading and mathematics for some

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years, and is now achieving a standard that is close to his chronological age.

Mrs Faye and Julia. Mrs Faye's daughter and son-in-law both suffer from mental illness and are unable to care for their children. Consequently, Mrs Faye has become guardian to Peter, aged 12, and Julia. Peter has become a school refuser and Mrs Faye admits that he is now beyond her control. Social Services and the EWO are considering placing him in residential care and Mrs Faye, who is now over 60, is supporting this course of action. Julia is an active and interested child, who participates in a variety of sporting activities. She is also academically able and socially competent, but finds her brother's behaviour to be very stressful. Mrs Faye is retired and in ill-health, but assists at a local primary school when transport or supervision of pupils is required.

Mr and Mrs Old and Graeme. Mr Old is a self employed contractor and Mrs Old works part time in a nursery for children with special needs and as a classroom assistant at Railside School. There are two children in the family. Graeme is interested in science and experiments and attends scouts regularly. His brother is two years younger.

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Appendix Two: The Schools.

Ashburton High School. With more than 1000 pupils, this 11-16 comprehensive has traditionally been regarded as the last choice by local families. Many of the pupils have been refused places by other school, both in this borough and other inner London boroughs. There is a wide ethnic mix of pupils in the school, and the majority of the pupils are African-Caribbean. Standards of behaviour and achievement are considered by many in the local community to be low and, in 1993, only 23% of pupils gained GCSE grades in the A-C band. In recent years the roll has recovered from a low of only 600, but it is still well below its standard number. The school has seldom been fully subscribed but, in 1993, when first, second, and third choices were combined, the Head declared that the incoming Year 7 was full. Consequently, some families, who did not state Ashburton as a preference on their LEA forms, did not gain a place and were allocated places in another school far to the south of the borough. This was not common knowledge by parents in the 1994 intake.

Shirley High School. This 11-16 comprehensive of 850 pupils is located in an area of more expensive housing than Ashburton and, consequently, has traditionally attracted an intake which is more advantaged, both culturally and economically. With a reputation as a school which emphasises pastoral care and individuality within a caring environment, it has proved to be attractive to middle class families and has been oversubscribed for many years. In 1993 many of the senior management team retired. Their replacements were largely chosen from within the school and, although the new Head appears to be attempting to increasingly emphasise the academic achievements of the school, most parents seem to believe that the new management team is indistinguishable from its predecessor. 45% of the Year 11 pupils gained GCSE grades in the A-C band in 1993. After a long and bitter campaign, which included one inconclusive vote, Shirley gained GM status in 1994.

Edenham High School. Unlike Shirley, Edenham has long been regarded as an academic school with traditional grammar school pretensions. An 11-16 comprehensive with almost 1100 pupils, Edenham is sited in an expensive location amongst large houses and tree lined avenues. The Head sees the school as competing with the many local independent schools rather than with the LEA comprehensives. Edenham was one of the first schools in the authority to gain Grant Maintained Status. It is always heavily oversubscribed and has introduced a policy of feeder primary schools in order to further control its intake. 54% of the Year 11 pupils gained GCSE grades in the A-C band in 1993.

Stanley Technical Boys' High School. This Voluntary Aided 11-16 boys' comprehensive was founded by a local Victorian industrialist in the 1880s. There are more than 600 pupils and accommodation is cramped and in need of modernisation. Stanley Tech has a reputation as a school which values and emphasises strong discipline, and it has an influential and active Old Boys' Association. At one stage, the Governors attempted to extend the sibling criterion to include grandfathers and fathers of potential applicants, but were forced to drop the idea when they came under pressure from the LEA. The pupils represent a large number of ethnic groups and some travel a considerable distance to attend. 34% of the Year 11 pupils gained GCSE grades in the A-C band in 1993.

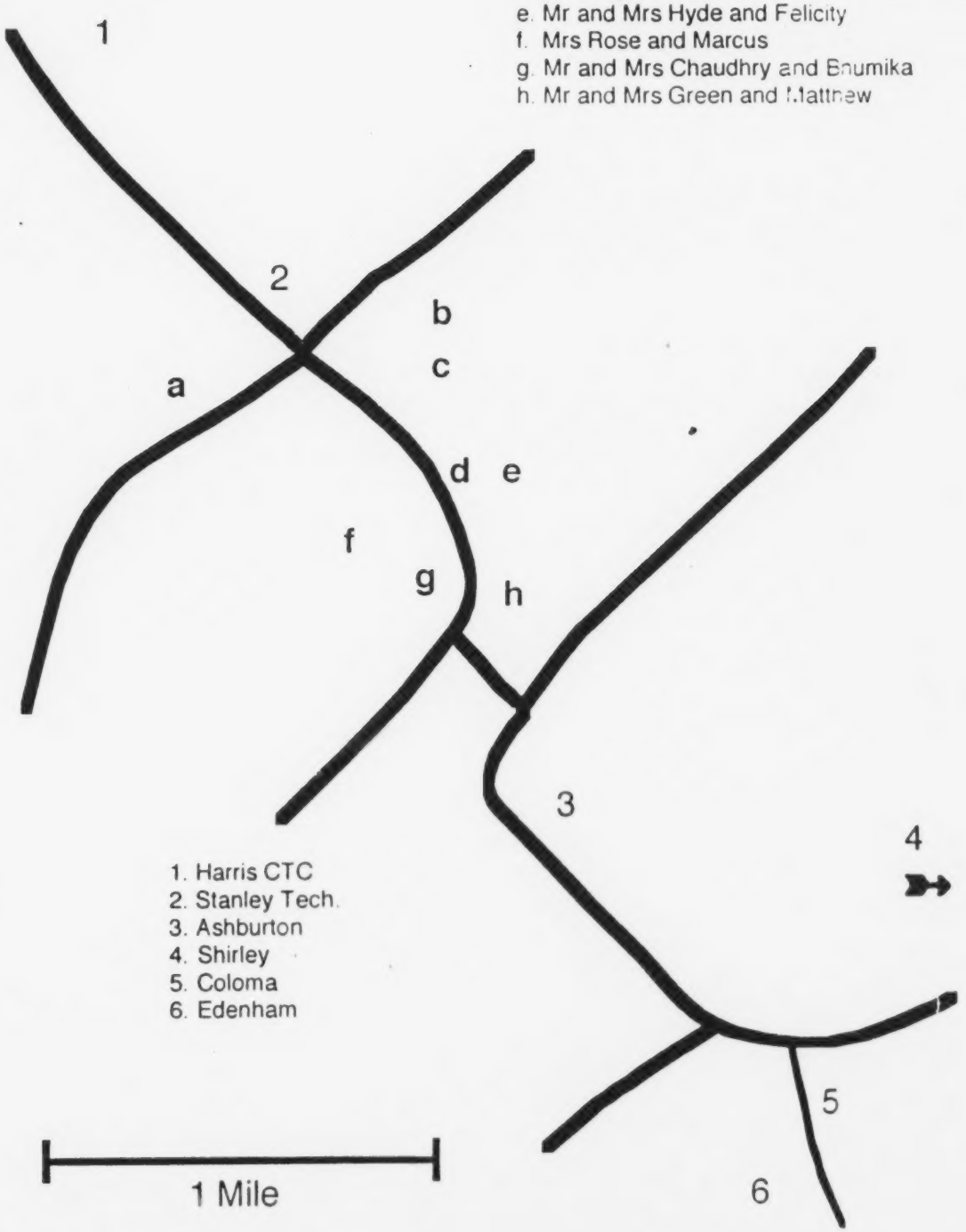
Harris City Technology College. Known locally as 'John Major's favourite school', this was an 11-16 maintained comprehensive until 1991, when the local authority closed the existing school and reopened it as a CTC. Although the parents and representatives of the local community ran an active campaign in support of the existing school, one of the Conservative Party's senior fundraisers promised some financial assistance and the Government provided the balance. The original buildings from the 1950s have been extended and extensively modernised throughout and public fascination with the carpets, restaurant and computers is widespread. Now an 11-18

school with an idiosyncratic selection process, there were 900 applications for the 180 Year 7 places in 1993. Only 27% of the Year 11 pupils gained GCSE grades in the A-C band in 1993, although the managers at Harris have explained this by claiming that these pupils were enrolled in the previous school and are not "real Harris pupils".

Coloma Convent RC School. As its name suggests, this is an 11-18 Catholic girls' school of approximately 600 pupils. It is situated close to Shirley and draws many of its pupils from its immediate surroundings, although many girls travel considerable distances to attend. The school has a strong academic tradition and has been regarded as one of the best girls' schools in the borough for many years. 83% of the Year 11 pupils gained GCSE grades in the A-C band in 1993 although A level results were not outstanding. Although the school emphasises its Catholic ethos, pupils from other beliefs have been admitted in the past. Given that the school is traditionally oversubscribed, this is an exceptional occurrence.

APPENDIX THREE: LOCATION OF PARENTS AND SCHOOLS

a. Mr and Mrs Grey and Helen
b. Mr and Mrs Old and Graeme
c. Mr and Mrs Forrest and Sally
d. Mrs Faye and Julia
e. Mr and Mrs Hyde and Felicity
f. Mrs Rose and Marcus
g. Mr and Mrs Chaudhry and Bhumika
h. Mr and Mrs Green and Matthew



1. Harris CTC
2. Stanley Tech.
3. Ashburton
4. Shirley
5. Coloma
6. Edenham